

Aiken Standard: Politics at play over nuclear waste

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By Rep. Joe Wilson

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COLUMN: Politics at play over nuclear waste

Politics are at play with nuclear waste disposal; unless Congress or our nation's legal system can successfully intervene, the American taxpayer is slated to lose this game.

To date, over \$30 billion has been collected in waste disposal fees from electricity ratepayers and \$10 billion has been spent on developing Yucca Mountain as a permanent high level nuclear waste repository. Despite the financial commitment from America's taxpayers and the numerous studies that confirm it is a proven repository for nuclear waste, President Obama has decided to act unilaterally and withdraw the project.

In his State of the Union address, President Obama stated his support for nuclear energy and its role in removing our dependence on foreign oil. But in the president's proposed budget to Congress, he axes funding for Yucca Mountain and put wheels in motion to terminate this project. Expanding the use of nuclear power will be impossible if this Administration doesn't support efforts to properly dispose of nuclear material. The Aiken Standard editorial from Feb. 17, precisely illustrated this administration's nuclear mixed messages by highlighting that the "president's lack of faith in using Yucca Mountain for nuclear waste storage sends a mixed signal to Americans."

To lessen our dependence on foreign oil, we must remain committed to investing in developing technologies - including biomass, nuclear, hydrogen fuel cell, wind and solar technologies. Nuclear energy is a clean, safe and cost-effective energy source that provides over half of our electricity in South Carolina. But in order to keep it safe, we must have a permanent site to dispose of it.

Containers of high levels of nuclear waste are still found in communities across America and they need a permanent and secure home. Without a repository like Yucca Mountain, communities across America will be left to their own devices when it comes to waste material.

Waste material found in South Carolina is from nuclear weapons production during the Cold War and also now from our commercial nuclear reactors that produce energy. The Savannah River Site, here in Aiken, will continue indefinitely to host the 7,200 containers of nuclear material if the president's plan comes to fruition.

Fortunately, South Carolina's lawmakers are not rolling over. Aiken County officials filed a lawsuit against the federal government - seeking a temporary restraining order to block plans to terminate the nuclear disposal site. Should the legal system fail, State Senator Greg Ryberg has filed legislation to try to get South Carolina's money back if Obama does not reverse his decision. I applaud Senator Ryberg and the Aiken County Council for their efforts to protect our communities from becoming waste sites for nuclear material and for defending the \$1.2 billion South Carolinians have invested in this project.

The president should not walk away from a \$10 billion investment and a 23 year bipartisan agreement to use Yucca Mountain as the nation's nuclear waste depository. Just last year, Congress overwhelmingly voted to not defund the Yucca Mountain repository in the fiscal year 2010 budget. This is the most studied piece of land on earth and we deserve answers from the administration about this reckless decision. We deserve to know how much influence Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had in this decision, as he represents Nevada and is vehemently opposed to Yucca Mountain serving as the nation's storage site for nuclear waste.

Most of Nevada's politicians seem OK with taxpayers taking a hit on this and effectively halting any hopes of developing nuclear energy in America to remove our dependence on foreign oil. Responding to the news that the Obama administration would withdraw this project, Richard Bryan, a former Democratic governor and senator said, "This is the day we put the Champagne on ice - we'll pop the cork after the motion is heard and decided."

For the sake of future energy development in our nation, and on behalf of America's hardworking taxpayers, I certainly hope Congress, or the courts, will help stop the impending celebration.

Rep. Joe Wilson represents the Second Congressional District of South Carolina which includes parts of Aiken County.